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The Origins of the New Terrorism

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The suicidal collision of hijacked commercial airliners into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001 was the most destructive terrorist attack in world history. Before the deaths of approximately 3,000 people in those attacks, the most devastating single terrorist attack had claimed the lives of about 380 people. The 2001 disaster took place at a time when experts had been defining a new form of terrorism focused on millennial visions of apocalypse and mass casualties. The catastrophic attacks confirmed their fears.

The State Department's *Patterns of Global Terrorism*, published in early 2002, revealed that terrorist attacks have scaled back in number in recent years, even though more casualties have occurred.¹ The late 1980s were a high point for the number of terrorist attacks, with the incidence of attacks exceeding 600 annually in the years 1985-88. With the exception of 1991, the number of terrorist attacks after 1988 decreased to fewer than 450 every year, reaching their recent low point in the years 1996-98, when the number of attacks was about 300. The number of attacks has increased slightly since 1998, when there were 274 attacks, but the level has not reached the number realized in any of the years of the 1980s. This report is not a linear progression from a large number to a small number of attacks, but the trend revealed is one of a decreasing incidence. Yet even if the frequency has decreased, the danger has not.

Osama bin Laden and the al Qaeda network of international terrorists are the prime examples of the new terrorism, but Islamic radicalism is not the only form of apocalyptic, catastrophic terrorism. Aum Shinrikyo, the Japanese religious cult, executed the first major terrorist attack using chemical

weapons on a Tokyo subway in 1995. The bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma revealed similar extremism by American right-wing militants. Other plots by Christian Identity terrorists have shown similar mass-casualty proclivities.

Nadine Gurr and Benjamin Cole labeled nuclear-biological-chemical (NBC) terrorism as the “third wave of vulnerability” experienced by the United States beginning in 1995. (The first two waves were the Soviet test of the atomic bomb in 1949 and the escalating nuclear arms race that followed.²) David Rapoport made a similar assessment that religiously motivated modern terrorism is the “fourth wave” in the evolution of terrorism, having been preceded by terrorism focused on the breakup of empires, decolonialization, and anti-Westernism.³

The National Commission on Terrorism found that fanaticism rather than political interests is more often the motivation now, and that terrorists are more unrestrained than ever before in their methods.⁴ Other scholarly sources have reached similar conclusions. Terrorism is increasingly based on religious fanaticism.⁵ Warnings about the dangers of nontraditional terrorism were raised frequently in pre-2001 literature.⁶ For instance, Ashton Carter, John Deutch, and Philip Zelikow declared in the pages of *Foreign Affairs* in 1998 that a new threat of catastrophic terrorism had emerged.⁷ Earlier concerns about alienating people from supporting the cause are no longer important to many terrorist organizations. Rather than focusing on conventional goals of political or religious movements, today’s terrorists seek destruction and chaos as ends in themselves. Yossef Bodansky’s *Bin Laden* quotes from S. K. Malik’s *The Quranic Concept of War*:

Terror struck into the hearts of the enemies is not only a means, it is in the end in itself. Once a condition of terror into the opponent’s heart is obtained, hardly anything is left to be achieved. It is the point where the means and the ends meet and merge. Terror is not a means of imposing decision upon the enemy; it is the decision we wish to impose upon him.⁸

Today’s terrorists are ultimately more apocalyptic in their perspective and methods. For many violent and radical organizations, terror has evolved from being a means to an end, to becoming the end in itself. The National Commission on Terrorism quoted R. James Woolsey: “Today’s terror-

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ists don't want a seat at the table, they want to destroy the table and everyone sitting at it."⁹

Some analysts argue that the evolution of terrorism represents continuity rather than change, that mass-casualty bombings have long been characteristic of terrorist methods, and that radical extremism has always dominated terrorist motivations.¹⁰ Walter Laqueur's most recent book warns against trying to categorize or define terrorism at all because there are "many terrorisms," and he emphasizes the particularities of various terrorist movements and approaches.¹¹ (Laqueur, however, recognizes some evolving strains of terrorism, especially the Islamist variant.) Bruce Hoffman discussed the definition of terrorism at length in his 1998 book, *Inside Terrorism*, and his final definition includes "political change" as the desired end-state of terrorist activity.¹² This would be more consistent with traditional means-end constructions of terrorism. Richard Falkenrath pointed out in a pre-9/11 article that mass-casualty terrorism is still an aberrant occurrence.¹³ A recent survey of terrorism suggests historical and intellectual links between the fascism of fanatical Islamist terrorism today and the totalitarian movements of the 20th century, further emphasizing continuity rather than change.¹⁴

Most recent scholarship, however, has taken the perspective that contemporary terrorism represents a significant departure from the past. Various factors have led to the development of this new type of terrorism. Paul Wilkinson pondered the increase in indiscriminateness among terrorists, and he posited several possible reasons accounting for this upsurge.¹⁵ First, the saturation of the media with images of terrorist atrocity has raised the bar on the level of destruction that will attract headline attention. Second, terrorists have realized that civilian soft targets involve lower risk to themselves. Finally, there has been a shift from the politically-minded terrorist to the vengeful and hard-line fanatic.

While Wilkinson's factors accurately describe developments in terrorist strategy and tactics, there are more fundamental forces at work. The world has undergone a variety of changes on several levels. While it is impossible to link all social changes to terrorism today, it is possible to track several distinct factors that have converged to evolve a form of terrorism that is unprecedented in the level of threat it poses around the world. This article will explore these factors from cultural, political, and technological perspectives.

Cultural Factors

Islamic radicalism is the most notorious form of the new culture of terrorism, but it is far from the only variety of cultural trends motivating terrorist activity. Numerous cults, whose emergence in many cases has been synchronized with the turn of the new millennium, have also posed an in-

“Islamic radicalism is not the only form of apocalyptic, catastrophic terrorism.”

creasing threat. Finally, the American religious right has been active with escalating and destructive objectives, although law enforcement presence has restrained these groups.

It is important to distinguish religious terrorists from those terrorists with religious components, but whose primary goals are political. Religiously motivated terrorist groups grew sixfold from 1980 to 1992 and continued to increase in the 1990s. Hoffman asserted that “the religious imperative for terrorism is the most important characteristic of terrorist activity today.”¹⁶ This may not be as much an entirely new phenomenon as a cyclic return to earlier motivations for terror. Until the emergence of political motives such as nationalism, anarchism, and Marxism, “religion provided the only acceptable justifications for terror.”¹⁷ However, terrorism in modern times has not, until recent years, been so dominated by religious overtones. At the time when modern international terrorism first appeared, of the 11 identifiable terrorist groups, none could be classified as religious.¹⁸

Today’s terrorists increasingly look at their acts of death and destruction as sacramental or transcendental on a spiritual or eschatological level. The pragmatic reservations of secular terrorists¹⁹ do not hold back religious terrorists. Secular terrorists may view indiscriminate violence as immoral. For religious terrorists, however, indiscriminate violence may not be only morally justified, but constitute a righteous and necessary advancement of their religious cause. In addition, the goals of secular terrorists are much more attuned to public opinion, so senseless violence would be counterproductive to their cause, and hence not palatable to them. As Hoffman observed, the constituency itself differs between religious and secular terrorists. Secular terrorists seek to defend or promote some disenfranchised population and to appeal to sympathizers or prospective sympathizers. Religious terrorists are often their own constituency, having no external audience for their acts of destruction.²⁰

Aum Shinrikyo has been included in typologies of terrorism that include radical Islamists as part of a group of religiously motivated organizations that attack symbols of the modern state.²¹ In many ways, the dynamics of cultist followings make groups such as Aum Shinrikyo (also known as Aleph) more dangerous than religious terrorists rooted in conventional and broadly based religious traditions or denominations. There is no constituency of more

moderate adherents to share common beliefs with the radical group while at the same time posing a restraining influence. For the fundamentalist Islamic or Christian radical, authoritative figures from either of those religions can condemn violence and de-legitimize the terrorist, at least in the eyes of the average faithful.

Another feature of religious cults that makes them incredibly dangerous is the personality-driven nature of these groups. Cultist devotion to one leader leaves followers less able to make their own moral decisions or to consult other sources of reasoning. If that leader is emotionally or mentally unstable, the ramifications can be catastrophic. The more dangerous religious terrorist groups from traditional faiths may often share this feature of the cult: a charismatic leader who exerts a powerful influence over the members of the group.

According to many analysts, Aum Shinrikyo demonstrated its comparatively more threatening potential in its sarin attack in the Tokyo subway. As D. W. Brackett wrote, "A horrible bell had tolled in the Tokyo subway. . . . Terrorists do not follow rules of engagement in their operations but they do absorb the lessons to be learned from successful acts of violence."²² If for no other reason than providing an example to others, Aum Shinrikyo has gained notoriety as one of the more dangerous terrorist elements. Despite setbacks such as the incarceration of key leadership figures, the group continues to pose future threats. The ability of Aum Shinrikyo to recruit individuals with a high level of education and technical knowledge also has been a significant aspect of the threat posed by the cult.²³

In the past, cults were not viewed as national security threats; they were more dangerous to unwary individuals who might succumb to the cult's influence. Even the emergence of cultist mass suicides did not alter this perception. However, the recent appearance of cults willing and able to adopt destructive political goals has revised the more benign view of the cult phenomenon. Since cults are often fundamentally based on the violence of coercion, they can be accustomed to the mindset necessary to adopt terrorist methods. Although cults more often practice a mental violence with psychological control and extreme invasions of privacy, they do occasionally engage in physical abuse. The most dangerous cults are also fascinated by visions of the end of the world—which, like radicals from more mainstream religions, cultists often believe that they are instrumental in bringing about. The nature of the cult's mythical figure can also be indicative of the level of threat. A vengeful deity is more threatening than a suffering savior. This sign is somewhat unpredictable, however, because cults can switch their principal myths as circumstances change.²⁴ In summary, cults are a particularly dangerous form of religious terrorism because they can appear quickly without warning,

have no rational goals, and can become agitated due to the apprehension and hostility with which they are viewed by the society at large.

Whether initiated by cultists or by extremists from more established religions, the violence of religious terrorists can be particularly threatening in comparison with that of the political terrorists of earlier years. As Hoffman notes, “For the religious terrorist, violence is a divine duty . . . executed in direct response to some theological demand . . . and justified by scripture.”²⁵ Religion can be a legitimizing force that not only sanctions but compels large-scale violence on possibly open-ended categories of opponents.²⁶ Terrorist violence can be seen as a divinely inspired end in itself. One explanation that has been proffered to account for violent Islamic extremism views revenge as the principal goal of the terrorists.²⁷ This reasoning makes political change or conventional political objectives irrelevant, and it is consistent with observations that violence is itself the objective. Fundamentalist Islam “cannot conceive of either coexistence or political compromise. To the exponents of Holy Terror, Islam must either dominate or be dominated.”²⁸ A recent study that traced the Islamic theological doctrine to the Middle Ages noted recent philosophical developments that explain the preponderance of religious mass-casualty terrorism coming from adherents of Islam.²⁹

Remarkably, a recent analysis of bin Laden’s fatwa, published in *Studies of Conflict and Terrorism*, found that the content of the fatwa was “neither revolutionary nor unique, as it encapsulates broad sentiments in the Muslim world, especially that of Islam’s being on the defensive against foreign secular forces and modernization.”³⁰ However, some of the content of the fatwa does fall directly within the paradigm of contemporary religious terrorism. Consider the following excerpts:

Praise be to God, who revealed the book, controls the clouds, defeats factionalism, and says in his book: “But when the forbidden months are past, then fight and slay the pagans wherever ye find them. . . .”

On that basis, and in compliance with God’s order, we issue the following fatwa to all Muslims:

The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies—civilians and military—is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it.³¹

In an article published shortly after 9/11, Steven Simon and David Benjamin noted that many al Qaeda attacks, including the major planning phase of the 9/11 attacks, took place during favorable times for the Palestinians in the Middle East peace process, and that no foreign policy changes by the US government could possibly have appeased the bin Ladenist radical.³²

While Islamic terrorists are the most notorious of today's violent radicals, others such as right-wing Christian extremists also exhibit many characteristics of the new terrorism. Mark Juergensmeyer, in his book *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, identified three elements that Islamists, radical Christians, and other religious terrorists share: They perceive their objective as a defense of basic identity and dignity; losing the struggle would be unthinkable; and the struggle is in deadlock and cannot be won in real time or in real terms.³³

In the past, right-wing Christian terrorists conducted racially motivated or religiously motivated acts of violence discriminately against chosen victims, and confrontation with the state was limited to instances when the state interfered with the political or religious agenda of the terrorist groups.³⁴ Today, some such groups are directly hostile to the government, which adherents believe is engaged in a widespread conspiracy threatening the existence of the "white Christian way of life." A recent FBI strategic assessment of the potential for domestic terrorism in the United States focused on such groups as Christian Identity and other ultraconservative movements associated with Christian fundamentalism.³⁵ The most extreme of these fanatics attribute a subhuman status to people of color, which in their eyes mitigates any moral compunction to avoid harming such individuals. In addition, they view themselves in a perpetual battle with the forces of evil (as manifested through non-white races and a powerful, sinister government) that must culminate in the apocalyptic crisis predicted by the Book of Revelations. The Christian terrorists view it as their duty to hasten the realization of this divine plan, which permits and even exhorts them to greater levels of violence. That violence is directed against existing social structures and governments, which are viewed to be hopelessly entangled with such "dark forces" as Jewry, enormous financial conglomerates, and international institutions trying to form an ominous "new world order."

While Christian violence in the United States has been discriminately focused for decades against racial minorities and "immoral" targets, it recently has expanded into attempted bombings and poisoning municipal water supplies.³⁶ These indiscriminate attacks demonstrate a willingness to tolerate greater levels of collateral damage in efforts to generate mass levels of casualties. The bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City was the pinnacle of this trend, and although Timothy McVeigh accepted responsibility for that attack, some speculate that there was additional involvement by other conservative militia or Christian terrorists.³⁷ Effective domestic law enforcement in the United States has largely prevented these groups from achieving widespread violence on the level of Oklahoma City, making that incident a tragic exception among a larger number of foiled plots.

“At the same time that globalization has provided a motivation for terrorism, it has also facilitated methods for it.”

While there is certainly no cooperation between foreign Islamist and US-domestic Christian radicals, there is a disquieting similarity in their views. August Kreis of the paramilitary group Posse Comitatus responded to the collapse of the World Trade Center towers with this disconcerting rant: “Hallelu-Yahweh! May the WAR be started! DEATH to His enemies, may the World Trade Center BURN TO THE GROUND!”³⁸ Jessica Stern’s recent book, *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill*, which compiles interviews with international terrorists conducted over five years, does not begin with an example from the Guantanamo Bay detention facility or the streets of the Middle East.³⁹ Her introductory example is a former Christian terrorist in a Texas trailer park. While Islamic terrorism is the most salient threat to the United States, it is not the only danger posed by the new trend of a culture of religious violence and extremism.

A cluster of several cultural features among new international terrorist groups indicates the high level of threat. These aspects include a conception of righteous killing-as-healing, the necessity of total social destruction as part of a process of ultimate purification, a preoccupation with weapons of mass destruction, and a cult of personality where one leader dominates his followers who seek to become perfect clones.⁴⁰ These aspects taken together represent a significant departure from the culture of earlier terrorist groups, and the organizations that these characteristics describe represent a serious threat to the civilized world.

Political and Organizational Factors

A number of developments on the international scene have created conditions ripe for mass-casualty terrorism. Gross inequalities in economic resources and standards of living between different parts of the world are a popular reason given for the ardency and viciousness of contemporary terrorists,⁴¹ although governmental collapse in “failed states” as a breeding ground for terrorists presents a more convincing variation on this logic.⁴² However, there is no “comprehensive explanation in print for how poverty causes terror,” nor is there a “demonstrated correlation between the two.”⁴³ The intrusion of Western values and institutions into the Islamic world through the process of free-

market globalization is an alternative explanation for the growth of terrorism, which is the weaker party's method of choice to strike back.⁴⁴ The process of globalization, which involves the technological, political, economic, and cultural diminution of boundaries between countries across the world, has insinuated a self-interested, inexorable, corrupting market culture into traditional communities. Many see these forces as threatening their way of life. At the same time that globalization has provided a motivation for terrorism, it has also facilitated methods for it.

One of the major consequences of globalization has been a deterioration of the power of the state.⁴⁵ The exponential expansion of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), regional alliances, and international organizations has solidified this trend. Although certainly not a conventional humanitarian-based NGO like the Red Cross or Doctors without Borders, al Qaeda has distinguished itself as among the most "successful" of non-governmental organizations in pursuing its privately-funded global agenda. The trend among terrorists to eschew direct connections with state sponsors has had several advantages for the enterprising extremist. Terrorist groups are more likely to maintain support from "amorphous constituencies," so extreme methods are more acceptable because such methods can be used without fear of alienating political support.⁴⁶ Harvey Kushner described this development as a growth of "amateur" groups as direct state sponsorship has declined.⁴⁷ Lawrence Freedman pointed out that the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan was not so much a state sponsor of terrorism as it was a "terrorist-sponsored state."⁴⁸

Terrorists do, however, continue to enjoy the benefits of indirect state sponsorship. Although the opportunity for state sponsorship has arguably diminished as a result of the Bush Administration's war on terror that has been prosecuted in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, state sponsorship remains widespread. In fact, developments in counterterrorist measures may propagate some dangerous trends of modern terrorism. When terrorists cannot rely on direct state sponsorship, they may become less accountable and harder to track. States must conceal their involvement by exercising less control and thus maintain less-comprehensive intelligence of radical terrorist organizations. Many states have been on the US government list of state sponsors for more than a decade, including Cuba, Iran, Iraq, North Korea, Libya, and Syria. More recently, Sudan and Afghanistan became government sponsors of terrorism. Many state sponsors cooperate with one another to promote terrorist violence, making terrorist activity further disconnected from the foreign policy of any single state. Iran has funded training camps in Sudan, and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad has received support from both Iran and Syria.⁴⁹

Further exacerbating the problem is the method of funding, which often has no measures for accountability. Iran's support for terrorist organi-

zations can include no particular target selection, and it occasionally results, with the funds disappearing, in no terrorist attacks.⁵⁰ This unpredictability is tolerated by state sponsors because of the occasional destructive payoff and the obfuscation of evidence connecting the state to the terrorist. Iran has consciously created a decentralized command structure because of these advantages.⁵¹ A further advantage of maintaining arm's length from extremist operatives is for self-protection. The government intelligence organization of Sudan evidently monitored Osama bin Laden while he lived in that country, apparently to prevent his activists from eventually doing harm to even that extremist government.⁵²

While the American operations in Afghanistan and Iraq have diluted the threat from those states, other sponsors have possibly been left off official lists for political reasons. (It has been frequently argued that inclusion of a state on the list of state sponsors of terrorism reflects its relationship with the United States.⁵³) Pakistani intelligence reportedly has been involved in sponsoring violent terrorists, both in Afghanistan and in the contentious Kashmir. Additionally, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been at the center of controversy over sponsorship and proliferation of radicalism and violence. Laurent Murawiec, an analyst at the RAND Corporation, attracted public attention by pointing out the dangers of Saudi support for radical Islamists and specifically Osama bin Laden in a briefing to the Defense Policy Board in 2002. While no official publication of the RAND Corporation documents this analysis, Murawiec highlighted evidence of Saudi support for the Islamist agenda through Islamic educational venues and financial backing.

So while globalization has helped remove many of the restraints that state sponsorship once imposed, terrorists can still enjoy the funding and protection that sponsorship provides. Another factor of globalization that benefits terrorism is targeting: "In today's globalizing world, terrorists can reach their targets more easily, their targets are exposed in more places, and news and ideas that inflame people to resort to terrorism spread more widely and rapidly than in the past."⁵⁴ Among the factors that contribute to this are the easing of border controls and the development of globe-circling infrastructures, which support recruitment, fund-raising, movement of materiel, and other logistical functions.

In addition to international political changes, developments in organizational practice have enhanced the lethality of terrorists. As corporations have evolved organizationally, so have terrorist organizations. Terrorist groups have evolved from hierarchical, vertical organizational structures, to more horizontal, less command-driven groups. John Arquilla, David Ronfeldt, and Michele Zanini note that terrorist leadership is derived from a "set of principles [that] can set boundaries and provide guidelines for decisions and

actions so that members do not have to resort to a hierarchy—“they know what they have to do.”” The authors describe organizational designs that may “sometimes appear acephalous (headless), and at other times polycephalous (Hydra-headed).”⁵⁵ Paul Smith observed that the multi-cellular structure of al Qaeda gave the organization agility and cover and has been one of its key strengths.⁵⁶ This flexibility has allowed al Qaeda to establish bases using indigenous personnel all over the world. It has infiltrated Islamic nongovernmental organizations in order to conceal operations.⁵⁷ Jessica Stern recently commented on al Qaeda’s ability to maintain operations in the face of an unprecedented onslaught:

The answer lies in the organization’s remarkably protean nature. Over its life span, al Qaeda has constantly evolved and shown a surprising willingness to adapt its mission. This capacity for change has consistently made the group more appealing to recruits, attracted surprising new allies, and—most worrisome from a Western perspective—made it harder to detect and destroy.⁵⁸

Technological Factors

In addition to the cultural and religious motivations of terrorists and the political and organizational enabling factors, technology has evolved in ways that provide unprecedented opportunities for terrorists. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the possibility of proliferation of nuclear weapons to non-state users is the primary factor that has significantly increased the danger of nuclear terrorism.⁵⁹ However, nonnuclear weapons of mass destruction and information technology also have created opportunities for terrorists that are in many ways more threatening than radiological terrorism because these alternatives are more probable.

Some theorists have argued that weapons of mass destruction do not represent a weapon of choice for most terrorists, even in these changing times. Stern writes that “most terrorists will continue to avoid weapons of mass destruction (WMD) for a variety of reasons,” preferring the “gun and the bomb.”⁶⁰ Brian Jenkins agreed that most terrorist organizations are technologically conservative, but he also noted that the self-imposed moral restraints which once governed terrorist actions are fading away.⁶¹ As the trends in the preceding sections reach fullness, increasing the proclivity toward mass-casualty terrorism, terrorists may turn more to these weapons that will better fit their objectives and moralities.

Walter Laqueur’s *New Terrorism* emphasizes the availability of very powerful weapons of mass destruction as the major current danger facing the industrialized world.⁶² Aside from the nuclear variety of WMD, biological and chemical weapons pose serious dangers. Biological weapons are limited

because human contact is required to spread the effects, but as the Asian brush with Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) demonstrated, the associated panic and uncertainty can take a large economic and political toll—not to mention the cost in human suffering for those exposed to the pathogen, perhaps without knowing how or even whether they have been infected. Biological weapons can come in a variety of forms, including viruses, bacteria, and rickettsia (bacteria that can live inside host cells like viruses).

Chemical toxins differ from biological weapons in that they are non-living pathogens and require direct infection and contact with the victim. This negates the continual spread of the weapon, but it entails more direct and possibly more damaging effects. Chemical agents appear in several types: choking agents that damage lung tissue, blood agents that cause vital organs to shut down, blister agents (also known as vesicants) that damage the skin, and—most lethal—nerve agents. Various methods allow the agent to infect its victim, including inhalation, skin absorption, and ingestion into the digestive tract. Exacerbating the danger is the fact that many deadly chemicals, or their components, are commercially available.

The State Department's annual report on terrorism asserted that the events of 11 September 2001 confirmed the intent and capability of terrorist organizations to plan and execute mass-casualty attacks. The report also stated that these unprecedented attacks may lead to an escalation of the scope of terrorism in terms of chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear methods.⁶³ The report further cited evidence discovered in military raids of Afghan terrorist facilities, the use of poison by Hamas to coat shrapnel in improvised explosives, and an unnamed group arrested in Italy with maps of the US embassy and possessing a compound capable of producing hydrogen cyanide. Activities of cults such as Aum Shinrikyo and American terrorist plans to poison municipal water facilities provide further evidence of the WMD threat.

Another key development is recent advances in communications and information technology. This technology provides both assistance to the terrorists and an opportunity for targeting as industrialized societies place greater reliance on information infrastructures. Terrorists will likely avoid dismantling the internet because they need the technology for their own communication and propaganda activities. Accordingly, terrorists may be more interested in "systemic disruption" rather than the total destruction of information networks.⁶⁴ While the consequences of a major disruption of American or global information infrastructures could be catastrophic financially or socially, terrorists have not shown the inclination or capability to undertake massive strikes in this area. There have been limited attacks along these lines, but the major use of information technology has been as an aid for terrorists rather than as a target of their activity. The reported use of the internet and

e-mail by al Qaeda to coordinate the strikes on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon provides a dramatic example of this sort of coordination. As Paul Pillar noted, “Information technology’s biggest impact on terrorists has involved the everyday tasks of organizing and communicating, rather than their methods of attack.”⁶⁵

Technology also has increased the ability of terrorists to conduct mass-casualty attacks. As noted earlier, the worst single terrorist attack before 9/11 claimed the lives of about 380 people. The yield of contemporary radiological, chemical, and biological weapons could dwarf that number, given the goals of today’s terrorists as exemplified by the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks, the Oklahoma City bombing, the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway, and other, less-successful attacks of the past decade. Technological developments and their availability as spread by the globalized market economy have unavoidably expanded the dangers of terrorism in the new century.

Conclusions

The practice of terrorism has undergone dramatic changes in recent years. The categorical fanaticism that is apparent in terrorist organizations across a spectrum of belief systems is a major part of this change. In the past, terrorists were more likely to be dominated by pragmatic considerations of political and social change, public opinion, and other such factors. Today, a phenomenon that was a minute rarity in the past—terrorists bent on death and destruction for its own sake—is more commonplace than ever. In addition, the statelessness of today’s terrorists removes crucial restraints that once held the most extreme terrorists in check or prevented them from reaching the highest levels in their organizations. Terrorists can still enjoy the funding and shelter that only a national economy can mobilize, but they are on their own to a greater degree in greater numbers than in the past. Organizationally, terrorists are using the non-hierarchical structures and systems that have emerged in recent years. Finally, the potential availability of nuclear, chemical, and biological WMD technology provides the prospect that these trends could result in unprecedented human disasters.

Terrorism has quantitatively and qualitatively changed from previous years. Whether it is Gurr and Coleman’s “third wave of vulnerability” or Rapoport’s “fourth wave of terrorism,” contemporary terrorism is a significant departure from the phenomenon even as recently as during the Cold War. The US *National Security Strategy* has recognized terrorism, in the memorable phrase “the crossroads of radicalism and technology,” as the predominant security threat in the post-Cold War world. The cataclysmic impact of 9/11 on

both the American strategic consciousness and the international security environment can scarcely be overstated. Those attacks resulted from a combination of cultural, political, and technological factors and were a revelation to the world of the emergence of the new terrorism.

NOTES

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7. Ashton Carter, John Deutch, and Philip Zelikow, "Catastrophic Terrorism," *Foreign Affairs*, 77 (November/December 1998), 80-94.
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9. National Commission on Terrorism, *Countering the Changing Threat*, p. 2.
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15. Paul Wilkinson, *Terrorist Targets and Tactics: New Risks to World Order*, Conflict Study 236 (Washington: Research Institute for the Study of Conflict and Terrorism, December 1990), p. 7.
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17. David C. Rapoport, "Fear and Trembling: Terrorism in Three Religious Traditions," *American Political Science Review*, 78 (September 1984), 668-72.
18. Bruce Hoffman, "'Holy Terror': The Implications of Terrorism Motivated by a Religious Imperative," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 18 (October-December 1995), 271-84.
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